



WHAT READERS SAY

In a fast-paced fictionalized account of a journalist's search for truth, *The Afternoon of March 30* reveals a view of American politics that is as illuminating as it is frightening. Focusing on the events surrounding John Hinckley Jr.'s attempt to assassinate President Reagan, this well-researched book describes how government agencies shut off access to any information suggesting a conspiracy at high levels while feeding misinformation to the media.

Nathaniel Blumberg convincingly demonstrates that this one incident epitomizes how our government serves the mighty and uses the trumped-up excuse of national security to trample our freedoms. Truth rings in every documented observation. To read *The Afternoon of March 30* is to understand the powerful forces controlling if not destroying our country.

— Ralph W. McGehee,
author of *Deadly Deceits:
My 25 Years in the CIA*

Blumberg takes life very seriously, but he also gets a monumental charge out of living it, contemplating it and commenting on it. His salty observations about

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THE AFTERNOON OF MARCH 30, is the story of a Montana newspaperman who is at first puzzled, then curious, then finally outraged by what the national news media never told the American people about the attempt of John W. Hinckley Jr. to assassinate the president of the United States.

It is a real-life mystery story, a detective story, a newspaper story, a spy story and more than one love story. It is a polemic that explores the strange "coincidences," curious "happenstances," major discrepancies, critical omissions and possible covert disinformation activities in the wake of a bullet that came within an inch of changing the course of history. It is a story of a journalist's fierce devotion to the American ideals of freedom and justice. It is a different kind of *roman à clef*.

Even more dangerous for the future of our country than a conspiracy to assassinate a president is a conspiracy to manipulate and control what the American people are told by the national news media. This book—among much else—examines the official cover-up of vital information that left scores of unanswered questions surrounding the event of the afternoon of March 30, 1981. From the book, page 6:

When it happened it was beyond the grotesque. For seconds Jonathan Blakely was stunned. John Chancellor, eyebrows raised, informed the viewers of NBC Nightly News that the brother of the man who tried to kill the president was acquainted with the son of the man who would have become president if the attack had been successful. As a matter of fact, Chancellor said in a bewildered tone, Scott Hinckley and Neil Bush had been scheduled to have dinner together at the home of the vice president's son the very next night. And, of course, the engagement had been canceled. . .

Then a peculiar thing happened: The story vanished. To this day, it has never been reported in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* or many other metropolitan newspapers, never again mentioned by any of the television news networks, and never noted in news magazines except for a brief mention in *Newsweek*, which lumped it with two ludicrous conspiracy scenarios as if the Bush-Hinckley connection didn't deserve some sort of explanation. [See *Newsweek*

practically everything—people, government, business, sports, politics, money, marriage, American culture and society in general—are here for the taking or leaving.

One reviewer has accused Blumberg of writing bad prose as he explores the national and local press through his chosen vehicle, the March 30, 1981, assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan. Lapses, maybe, but **The Afternoon of March 30** is chockful of nuggets that will cause many readers to feel the gut-wrenchings of the characters and simultaneously see themselves and their frustrations.

There's both wheat and chaff in this book, but Blumberg has done sufficient winnowing to produce a bumper crop of the former.

Amateur press critics who seek to sharpen their skills would do well to give **The Afternoon of March 30** a whirl.

— Steve Smith
in the *Missoulian*

The Afternoon of March 30, "a contemporary historical novel," is on one level about the attempted assassination of President Reagan by John W. Hinckley, Jr. On another level, this very complex book is about the American press and Blumberg's vision of what the American press should be. The core of the book is here. Blumberg has written, in the form of a novel, a polemic on the present state of the press. The novel form works well here. Rapidly paced, it says a lot about the press while using, most expertly, the facets of the novel—fine dialogue, character development, deep tension, action and sexual intimacy.

I am not going to describe this provocative and disturbing book by the usual forms of compression. Read it free of preformed opinions. It's not dull. It goes like wildfire. In many ways it is remarkable. The Hinckley case is the vehicle; the press, its role and its suppression

SIDEBAR below]

But many other significant facts concerning the Bush and Hinckley families have remained unexplored and unexplained, in addition to other matters related to the assassination attempt detailed in this book. For examples:

- Neil Bush, a landman for Amoco Oil, told Denver reporters he had met Scott Hinckley at a surprise party at the Bush home January 23, 1981, which was approximately three weeks after the U.S. Department of Energy had begun what was termed a "routine audit" of the books of the Vanderbilt Energy Corporation, the Hinckley oil company. In an incredible coincidence, on the morning of March 30, three representatives of the U.S. Department of Energy told Scott Hinckley, Vanderbilt's vice president of operations, that auditors had uncovered evidence of pricing violations on crude oil sold by the company from 1977 through 1980. The auditors announced that the federal government was considering a penalty of two million dollars. Scott Hinckley reportedly requested "several hours to come up with an explanation" of the serious overcharges. The meeting ended a little more than an hour before John Hinckley Jr. shot President Reagan.
- Although John Hinckley Sr. was characterized repeatedly by the national news media as "a strong supporter of President Reagan," no record has been found of contributions to Reagan. To the contrary, in addition to money given to Bush, a fellow Texas oilman, as far back as 1970, the senior Hinckley raised funds for Bush's unsuccessful campaign to wrest the nomination from Reagan. Furthermore, he and Scott Hinckley separately contributed to John Connally in late 1979 when Connally was leading the campaign to stop Reagan from gaining the 1980 presidential nomination. The Bush and Hinckley families, according to one newspaper, "maintained social ties." The deeply troubled Hinckley oil company obviously would fare better under a Bush presidency than it would under President Reagan.
- Available evidence at the time made clear many other connections between the Bush and Hinckley families. Reported "coincidences" involving the Hinckleys and the family of H.L. Hunt also remained unexplored. Instead, the official government line, accepted without challenge by the media, was that the assassination attempt was nothing more than the senseless act of a deranged drifter who "did it to impress Jodie Foster." That enshrined historical "truth" is thoroughly examined in this book.
- To understand how that came to pass, it is essential to examine the travesty of the trial of John W. Hinckley, presided over by Judge Barrington D. Parker.

NOTE: In May 2001, Barrington D. Parker was one of the first eleven nominees for appointment to federal appeals courts by President George W. Bush.

Parker, a Republican appointed to the federal bench by President Richard Nixon, was a man with an established

are at issue.

— Harrison Lane
in *Montana Magazine*

His friends (I am privileged to be among them) have watched with intrigue and, at times, astonishment as Blumberg—meticulous journalist, riveting lecturer, demanding media critic and admired university professor—pieced together what he calls the "strange coincidences" surrounding the assassination attempt.

There is much more to the Hinckley assassination story: the confinement of Hinckley in a prison designed for behavior modification, the sealing from the public of Hinckley's prison writings in which he says he was part of a conspiracy, the inexcusable delay in the trial (nearly 13 months after the assassination attempt), the insanity of the trial itself, the judge's ruling that sealed evidence obtained after Hinckley's arrest couldn't be presented (the evidence remains hidden from the public to this day).

Blumberg's book cries out for answers to the haunting questions it has raised.

— Rick Seifert in the *Longview*
(*Washington*) *Daily News*

Blumberg has made a career out of analyzing the media, and has often been less than delighted with what he has found. But coverage of the Reagan assassination attempt seemed to him to represent a new low. His careful survey of the news coverage pays off, with readers being treated to a rare inside look at the national media.

— Michael Crater in the *Helena*
(*Montana*) *Independent Record*

reputation for politically partisan decisions and notable reversals on appeal. For one of many examples, when Edwin Reinecke, then the lieutenant governor of California under Governor Reagan, was convicted of lying to the Senate Judiciary Committee, Judge Parker could have imposed a five-year jail sentence and a \$2,000 fine, but chose to give Reinecke an 18-month suspended sentence and one month of unsupervised probation. More importantly, not for nothing did Parker achieve notoriety as "the CIA's judge." Orlando Letelier, an influential opponent of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, was assassinated in 1976 in broad daylight on a street in our national capital. The judge at the trial was Barrington Parker. The Director of Central Intelligence was George Bush, father of George W. Bush. Judge Parker refused to allow the defense to present any testimony concerning the widely suspected involvement of the CIA. Parker came through again in 1977 when a former director of the CIA, Richard Helms, pleaded no contest to two charges of lying to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when he testified that the CIA had not covertly supplied money to opponents of Salvadore Allende in a secret effort to block his election as president of Chile. Judge Parker, before passing sentence, told Helms that "if public officials embark deliberately on a course to disobey and ignore the laws of our land because of some misguided and ill-conceived notion and belief that there are earlier commitments and considerations which they must first observe, the future of this country is in jeopardy." Judge Parker then chose to jeopardize the future of this country by giving Helms a suspended two-year sentence and a \$2,000 fine.

- Shortly before this decision, the lawyer for Helms, Edward Bennett Williams, pleaded with Judge Parker for a lenient sentence for his client because Helms "would bear the scar of conviction for the rest of his life." After Parker accommodated him, Williams told reporters outside the courtroom that Helms would "wear this conviction like a badge of honor." That night more than 400 former and perhaps current CIA employees gathered at a country club outside Washington, gave Helms a standing ovation, put two wastebaskets atop a piano and quickly contributed more than enough to pay his fine. On that night of November 4, 1977, a faction within the Central Intelligence Agency openly declared war on the elected and legitimate government of the United States.
- And how did Barrington Parker become the judge for Hinckley's trial? "In another sharp diversion from regular courthouse procedure," as the *Washington Post* flatly reported, Parker's name was secretly selected from a stack of cards that bore the names of 14 federal judges who were available. "That selection process normally is carried out by a court clerk," the *Post* continued, but this time the selection was made in the private chambers of the senior judge. Thus was the presiding judge of the Hinckley trial selected in a Star Chamber session, leading to a national outcry at the decision, summed up by what one editorial writer called "one of the worst miscarriages of justice in the nation's history."
- The shooting on the afternoon of March 30 was voted the "top headline story of 1981" by newspaper and broadcast editors. It is always listed as one of the biggest stories of the decade. As

Though more serious in tone, **The Afternoon of March 30** holds the reader's interest as a Robert Ludlum or Ken Follett thriller would.

—Les Gapay in the *San Jose (California) Mercury News*

The Afternoon of March 30 has a new chance at a spotlight now that W is in the White House. It was serendipity that I found it; I happened to be browsing in Powell's one evening and there it was. I'd missed it the first time. Read the whole thing in a couple sittings. Disturbing. Stunning.

—Dean Baker, reporter, Vancouver, Washington, *Columbian*, in a note to the author in 2001

You have written a pretty bad novel but a damn forceful and persuasive book. Some of your positions strike me as extreme, but the general thrust of your work is right and convincing.

—A.B. (Bud) Guthrie, Jr., Winner of the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, in a note to the author in 1984

I have read **The Afternoon of March 30** with fascination. I really could not put it down, once I had started.

If you ever come to London—and why should you, if you live in Montana, which I understand from friends of mine is one of the special places—then do let me know.

—Doris Lessing, winner of both the 2001 David Cohen British Literature Prize and Spain's Asturias Prize for Literature—and still denied the richly deserved Nobel Prize for Literature—in a note to the author in 1984.

such, readers of this book will discover scores of facts never reported or underplayed in the national news media. Remember, this book was published in large part as a warning of the dangers posed by the Bush family which, if nothing else, was prophetic.

SIDEBAR: Excerpts from an interview by Theresa Walla, in United Press International article, March 9, 1985

Journalism professor Nathaniel Blumberg was so disturbed about the investigation into the attempted assassination of President Reagan that he turned his suspicions into a 377-page novel.

In **The Afternoon of March 30**, Blumberg blends fact and fiction in looking at the unreported "connections" between Hinckley's family and that of Vice President George Bush, the man who came within a heartbeat of the presidency of the United States.

"What I'm really after is the case to be officially reopened," said the Rhodes scholar and former dean of the University of Montana journalism school. "If they can answer all the questions satisfactorily, I'll be delighted," he said in an interview. "In truth, I don't think all the questions can be answered without opening up a whole new can of worms."

Blumberg's unease is now focused on the indifference shown to what he calls "the story behind the story." Bush, he said, has questions to answer in connection with the attempt. So do the FBI and the judge who presided over Hinckley's trial, according to Blumberg.

"I'm not saying there was a conspiracy to assassinate Reagan," Blumberg emphasized. "I'm saying there was a conspiracy to keep significant information from the public that it has a right to know."

Blumberg asks his readers to consider his contentions that journalists were fed a barely believable story full of inconsistencies. A long-time media critic, he decided the example warranted more than a critique of press performance in a crisis. Such efforts, he said, usually "go out there and die." Instead, he chose to weave his questions into a novel so it would reach a broader audience and allow him to probe problems in society and corruption in government, as well as maladies of the U.S. press.

The book chronicles the adventures of a fictitious Montana newsman who follows the information trail deserted by the national media. His documentation is put in the form of an article the fictitious hero is writing.

Blumberg published the book on his own Wood FIRE Ashes Press to retain total control over the quality.

"Have you ever heard an author say what a great job his publisher did with a book?" he asks. But, without a commercial advertising campaign, he's had to market the book in an "organic, straightforward fashion."

Blumberg says he mails out several copies of the novel each week and expects it to "stay alive as long as people continue to care about justice."

Analysis: Note that Reporter Walla, a former student of mine, was encouraged by Helena UPI to interview me for this story. She wrote a short article that was sent to the Seattle UPI Bureau, which promptly asked for a longer, more detailed piece. The expanded article was sent by the Seattle Bureau to national UPI, where it was killed.

SIDEBAR: *Newsweek*, April 13, 1981, Page 59**For Conspiracy Buffs Only**

In all the recent history of assassinations and assassination attempts in America, none seemed more clearly the work of one man with one gun and no rational motive than last week's audio- and video-taped attack on Ronald Reagan. But this shooting, like the others before it, churned up the usual wake of anomalies, discrepancies and coincidences that attend chaotic events in the real world—and so provided the usual grist for yet another generation of conspiracy theorists to chew over for years to come. The black comic and conspiratorialist Dick Gregory scooped the pack this time, assuring a Los Angeles talk-show host that the CIA and the FBI did it—and experienced students of the literature of assassinations could almost see a hundred similar theories blooming out of what seemed so fallow a patch of ground.

Among the possibilities:

■ **The Hinckley-Didn't-Do-It-or-at-Least-Not-Alone Theory.** The very videotapes that make such a seemingly open-and-shut case against John W. Hinckley Jr. never actually show his face until after his capture. As it happened, he was standing back in a cluster of newsmen, behind the cameras, until he started shooting. But a dedicated conspiracy buff might argue that he was (1) an innocent fall guy or (2) only one gun among two or more. Argument (2) offers the more tempting fodder for the conspiratorialist: one or two anomalous flashes of light

on the tape, a suspended moment in which members of Reagan's security force look the wrong way for the source of the shots and the scrambled first reports from an embarrassed Secret Service misstating the make and caliber of the pistol involved—a perfect invitation to a two-gun scenario.

■ **The Maybe-Hinckley-Did-It-but-the-Government-Helped Theory.** The first question a conspiratorialist might ask is how an ex-Nazi once arrested on a gun charge in Nashville, Tenn., on a day when Jimmy Carter was in town could escape being punch-carded into the Secret Service's computerized list of potential assassins. There were real security lapses at the scene as well—the ease with which Hinckley slipped into the press pack, for example, and the clay-pigeon distance Reagan had to walk to his car when it could have been parked closer to the hotel exit. The evidence in each instance points to carelessness, but there are no mistakes in conspiracy theories—only calculated acts.

■ **The Cherchez-Le-Veep Theory With Mystery Woman and Trilateral Corollary.** For the farthest-out plot-spinners, it will not pass notice that (1) George Bush addressed the Trilateral Commission the Sunday night before the shooting, that (2) Hinckley's brother, Scott, had a dinner date with Bush's son Neil that Monday and that (3) there were several phone calls from an unidentified woman to Hinckley's hotel room that day (the FBI said she was trying to call someone else). Any significance in these occurrences can be left to the imagination, and probably will be.

Note that the only significant item—the fact that the brother of the assassin is a close friend of the son of the new president of the United States if the bullet had been half an inch closer to the heart of Ronald Reagan—is buried at the end of a long list of ludicrous conspiracy theories. It is masterfully further buried between two other ridiculous items.